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Charles Altieri

The Objectivist Tradition

An objective; (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus, (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.

—Louis Zukofsky, “Sincerity & Objectification,” 1931

In any given instance, because there is a choice of words, the choice, if a man is in there, will be, spontaneously, the obedience of his ear to the syllables. The fineness, and the practice, lie here, at the minimum and source of speech.

O western wynd, when wilt thou blow
And the small rain down shall rain
O Christ that my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again.

—Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” 1950

Then for nine reigns there was no literary production! None at all; because there was neither consciousness of the ‘objectively perfect’ nor an interest in clear or vital ‘particulars’. Nothing—neither a new object nor the stripping of an old to the light—was ‘aimed at’.

—Zukofsky, “Sincerity & Objectification,” 1931

Poetic traditions make their mark less by virtue of themes or doctrinal values than through the modes of relatedness whose power and scope they demonstrate. By modes of relatedness I mean the ways

in which the basic elements of poetic form, the signs of how intelligence and craft shape materials and focus energies, offer models for the mind's means of adjusting its dynamic properties to features of experience. In commenting on "Western Wynd," Olson at once celebrates the power of its dynamic interplay between mind and world and testifies to the enduring effects of its energies liberated out of history by their capacity to create an enduring objective field. He teaches us to read a poem as new by opening himself to the relational lines of force that embody the qualities and scope of feelings constituting a distinctive attitude towards craft, and, through craft, towards a world worth attending to. Olson's testimony, in turn, celebrates and continues the efforts of his immediate objectivist masters, whose capacity to create a tradition is measured by the distinctiveness of the energies Olson has available to bring to his critical act. That these energies survive, and that they matter as much today as they did in 1913 and in 1931, is the testimony of this volume.

On the most general level, there are probably two basic modes of lyric relatedness—symbolist and objectivist styles. The former stress in various ways the mind's powers to interpret concrete events or to use the event to inquire into the nature or grounds of interpretive energies, while objectivist strategies aim to "compose" a distinct perceptual field which brings "the rays from an object to a focus." Where objectivist poets seek an artifact presenting the modality of things seen or felt as immediate structure of relations, symbolist poets typically strive to see beyond the seeing by rendering in their work a process of mediating upon what the immediate relations in perception reflect. Louis Zukofsky provides one index of this distinction by defining two properties as basic to objectivist poetry:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of . . . completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, or seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. . . .

This rested totality might be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. . . . Its character may be simply described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity—in other words, the resolving of words and their ideal into structure.

—Zukofsky, "Sincerity & Objectification," 1931

Where a symbolist poet would concentrate on relations that

dramatize meanings beyond the event, the poet in “Western Wynd” wants to make relational forces intensify “the detail, not mirage of seeing.” To do so articulates a field where one can think with things as they exist. The primary relations here are denotative (in an imaginary world) rather than connotative or metaphoric. In order to keep the denotations intensely resonant, the poet marks his field—perceptually and muscially—by a dense interplay of direct perceptions standing towards one another as planes in an abstract painting. The poetry is in the parallels between forms of desire and energy held together in a perceptual space. Wind and desire are less metaphors for feeling than its direct equivalent in physical fact, so that nature and person’s nature are adequate vehicles for one another, echoed again in the overt energies of the writing where the desire for concepts is constrained and directed into the plosive play of alliterating syllables and of strong vowels modulating the kinetic energies of speech from back to front of the mouth. Desire here takes form, not by being mastered but by achieving full expression in each of the overlapping energy fields—perception, memory, projected future, and act of writing. Desire becomes a condition of energy at rest in itself, and the theological analogues in Zukofsky’s poetic statement find here a perfectly adequate secular ground. The literal will suffice, provided one has learned the craft of the letter.

This model of poetic art needs to be continually reinvented because as soon as perceptual and compositional energies grow slack or seem inadequate to the mind’s needs, writers seek to supplement concrete detail by symbolic generalization. Consider now the state of wind and syllable during the nine reigns when for Zukofsky there was no literary production. Here are Shelley and Coleridge:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes . . .

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth,
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

* * *

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
Reality's dark dream!
I turn from you, and listen to the wind,
Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream
Of agony by torture lengthened out
That lute sent forth . . .
What tell'st thou now about?
'Tis of the rushing of a host in rout . . .

These are very different poetic acts of mind. They are not the only form of Romanticism, nor do they warrant careless modernist charges of egotism and vagueness. Shelley and Coleridge introduce new sources of perceptual and philosophical energy into English poetry. But in making the act of the interpretive mind, rather than the measuring mind, the poem's central focus, they also make central and inescapable some very serious problems. In their pursuit of dialectical symbolic structures capable of reconciling discordant elements into satisfying conceptual wholes, these poems simultaneously produce too little and too much meaning. On the one hand, the mind enacts only a mirage of seeing because it thinks about rather than with things. The wind has little objective status: what details the poet attends to are significant only as tenors for stories or spiritual metaphors like "pestilence stricken multitudes." And, on the other hand, as the mind moves over, rather than among, the particulars of its world, it leaves itself no place to rest which is not dependent upon the "trumpet" of a prophetic ego whose metaphors are its only authority. The pursuit of abstract synthesis through metaphoric processes is at best tenuous; the mind is always threatened by the possible return of self-consciousness insisting on the merely conceptual and fictive grounds for its orders and driving the self back into a despondent and passive relation to the natural energies its interpretations displace. Unseen presences, nature become metaphoric words, and story-telling winds, all too easily become again only the deadness of seen presences that resist metaphor, words which lack natural grounds, and stories revealed as only mirages in reality's dark dream. Moreover by so insistently dramatizing the efforts of mind locked into a single lyric space, the poem's craft is subject to the same alternations as its desire for meaning. At one extreme, lyric exaltation becomes the melodramatic tone poem of Shelley's opening trumpets, while at the other the verse slackens into prosaic analogues whining the poet's passive surrender to external forces. Composition verges on losing its ground in composure, and poetic modes of relatedness come dangerously close to echoing the frenetic dualities of the culture they

try to resist.

Shelley and Coleridge are great poets, but the modes of relatedness on which their greatness is based may be no longer accessible, or desirable, for our culture. Threatened by Enlightenment intellectual and social forces calling into question all they treasured, these poets' only line of defense was to make the sublime serve metaphysical purposes. The sublime enabled them to accept rationalist critiques of the limits of empirical propositions while creating a space in which the empirically unreal could remain imaginatively real, albeit indefinable except through the vehicle of symbolic imaginative dialectics. And by increasing the distance between the empirical and a realm of imaginative values, these poets purchased a Miltonic exaltation and tragic intensity no objectivist poet but Pound can rival. But the price of this nobility—in the psychic torments it creates no less than in the poetic postures it encourages—may be too high. And even this question may be irrelevant because the sublime too is a faith that may have died. The symbolist vision may not be one we can make new without the various ironies of Stevens and of Ashbery. This at least seems to be the case in a time when Shelley has become Ginsberg and Coleridge's wind speaks as it does in this stanza by Robert Bly:

The strong leaves of the box-elder tree,
Plunging in the wind, call us to disappear
Into the wilds of the universe,
Where we shall sit on the foot of a plant,
And live forever, like the dust.

Nature poet need not depend on such strained acts of interpretive will. Poets in this volume like Larry Eigner and Ron Loewinsohn have learned to think with things and to make compositional lines of force within the poem do the work of metaphor and dialectical interpretation. On the simplest level, Eigner uses haiku techniques to make new the possibility of "sincere" speech. In "Snow," the poet provides internal energies for an essentially denotative surface by playing against each other, in spacing, syntax, and structure, balanced forces of sight and hearing in order to register a delicately balanced moment of attention. Loewinsohn's "Ovingdean Church" performs a similar task through a more complex recovery of Williams. The poem's subject is a moment of rapt involvement in a simple, almost still landscape. Yet syntactic patterns, accentuated by the lack of overt metaphor and dramatic will to interpretation, charge the stillness with intense energy. The visual field is rich in complex motions created by the push of prepositions

emphatically placed in the lines. The “still standing” crosses and wall carry energy *from* the past, and distribute them across a visual space made virtually tactile by the dance of lines of force moving *above, beyond, and from the right*, until all resolve into a moment of quiet unfolding of the star *in* sky. Endurance in time is at once a vehicle for the motion of mind and physical properties and an echo of another permanence that holds all in stillness. Finally, the movement of seeing is delicately poised against the hypothetical suggestion of a photograph in order to place the play of motion and stillness in a context that forces us beyond the scene to the properties of mind and art that compose it and compose themselves in it. The reference to the photograph introduces dimensions of the mind’s desire for meaning which do not demand symbolic interpretation to be satisfied. Mediation need not be mystification.

As a last example of objectivist strategies for composing natural energies, consider David Ignatow’s “One Leaf.” Here compositional strategy makes fresh a sentimental subject by stressing several levels of relationship between rest and motion, until these properties become means for extending the sincerity of the act of naming into the objectified rest celebrated by Zukofsky. The intelligence here needs no metaphoric striving because it can make syntactic and musical cadence bring the leaf to articulate its speechless condition. The poet’s constructive act first of all mimes in the mind the leaf’s swaying by an anaphoric series of past participles. The “one leaf” literally moves across the compositional surface of the lines, accruing perceptual relations. That movement gathers resonance from two basic contrasts—a tension between terms for speech and the leaf’s inviolable presence and a gradual syntactic movement from pure past participle attribution to a negative predicate (establishing the mind’s attention by negating metaphoric interpretation), to an active predicate combining the leaf’s action with a sense of loneliness and particularity that nonetheless participates in larger unifying rhythms of nature. Then by virtue of the compositional intensity, the rhythms of nature blend with those of the attentive mind. This relation between nature and mind allows Ignatow to move beyond sincere presentation to a condition of musical objectification as an emblem for the depth of rest achieved. The elegantly varied liquids and long vowels of the opening sentence reach final composure in the way “breeze” returns to the tonic established in “leaf.” Rhythmic motion simultaneously dissolves the objective scene and preserves its properties in the balanced integrity of the fully achieved “rest” of the poem as composed and composing object.

II

I do believe that consciousness exists and that it is consciousness of something, and that is a fairly complete theology.

—Oppen, *Contemporary Literature*, 10, 2, "Interview," 1968

The poet wonders why so many today have raised up the word 'myth,' finding the lack of so-called 'myths' in our time a crisis the poet must overcome or die from, as it were, having become too radioactive, when instead a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve.

—Zukofsky, "Poetry/For My Son When He Can Read," 1946

For a man's problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature. . . . [He must work] in that area where nature has given him size, projective size.

—Olson, "Projective Verse," 1950

The objectivists repeatedly insist that theirs is not a doctrinal movement: there are objectivists but no objectivism because the poets share only a sense of the necessity and value of sincerity and a concern for the attention to craft, for the poem as machine made of words or the poem as thing in which ideas inhere. It is possible, nonetheless, to sketch a general definition of their poetic, that is of the discursive ways that they articulate forms of relatedness explored in poetry and speculate about the psychological and cultural significance of these forms.

As is the case with most abstract statements about poetics, objectivist theory is clearest and most widely shared in its accounts of the evils it opposes. Here Eliot and Pound are the significant figures. They developed the basic catalogue of the evils attendant upon the pursuit of the sublime as means of smuggling religion past Enlightenment customs. With the sublime, Dante's precise vision and disciplined dream give way to poetry that purchases transcendence by muddying perception with generalizations and thus cannot rest with objects until they have been transformed by metaphor into explicit analogues for psychic life. In pursuit of this "semi-allegorical gleam," Zukofsky tells us, "Poets put on singing robes to lose themselves in the universal." Because of this quest for transcending specific objective conditions, poets lose any sense of firm

ground on which the mind can rest and poetry achieve resolution. There is left only the triumph of will singing its own incoherence, the louder for every self-conscious reminder of the fictive status of its half-believed mythic substitutes for religion. And this uneasy will creates the range of evils Eliot would find both in his culture and in the poetry unable to escape cultural pressures—dissociated sensibility with its vacillations between abstract rumination and uncontrolled flights of feeling, and sentimental faith in progress and technology which might compensate for poets' discomfort with their craft and with their confused transcendental beliefs. Only the dream of progress could justify the bad faith of poets desperately convincing themselves that their devices were compatible with truths and that there were authorities to which they might submit the uneasy self-consciousness that dogged their efforts to dramatize sensibilities on a scale large enough to give content to the sublime.

Objectivism, then, is first of all a discipline of the poetic will and a critique of prophetic roles assumed by nineteenth century poets. Again Zukofsky is a precise spokesman: "no predatory manifestation," no imposition of a will not completely responsible in the poem for its acts—"Yet a manifestation making the mind more temperate because the poem exists and has perhaps recorded both state and individual." Objectivism, then, is not merely attention to objects: it entails the construction of aesthetic objects in such a way that the conditions of desire are themselves dramatized and forced to take responsibility for their productions. This demand for lucidity, however, creates serious constraints on the poet. As the imagist phase of objectivism makes clear, the impulse to avoid Romantic tendencies to let reason pander will can tempt poets to discipline the will virtually out of existence. Insisting on objectivity threatens reducing poetic craft to the merely descriptive function of making perceptual images—thus trapping poetic energies within scientific reductions of the psyche which, in turn, encourage other poets (like Yeats, Eliot, and Crane) to court the comfortable evasions of the sublime. And fear of prophetic role-playing can create the tension between poetic discourse and political commitment that silenced Reznikoff and Oppen in the thirties and forties. Similar distrust of ideas in poetry leads to the enervated satiric evasiveness of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," where self-consciousness once again collapses into self-pity. The central task, the imperative for Pound, Williams, Zukofsky, Olson and the writers in this volume, must be to use imagist techniques in such a way as to escape the limits of description and satire. As George Oppen put it, objectivist poets "attempt to construct meaning, to construct a method of thought from the imagist technique of poetry—from the imagist intensity of vision."

Construction, not description, would be the basic source of models of relatedness, and these would find their roots in the collagist techniques whose implications for poetry have been described by David Antin.

The basic principle of collage construction in poetry is aptly described by Ron Loewinsohn as "the layering of frames of reference." This layering can consist of elaborate cultural units, as in *The Cantos*, in the organization of discursive thought units characteristic of Olson, or in the delicate alignment of perceptual and syntactic units we have observed in objectivist nature poetry. In all these cases, collage allows a direct series of discrete objective notations fused into complex dimensions of interrelatedness not dependent on the interpretive will to dialectical synthesis. Consequently, poets need not submit to principles of dramatic order that encourage the pursuit of intensity by theatricalizing the poet's self-conscious stances in quest of sublimity. We have terms for meeting the challenges Eliot and Pound defined as basic to modernism because we have a framework for exploring fresh ways of articulating emotions and acts of mind. Thus it becomes possible to justify Oppen's equation of a phenomenological poetics with theology and Zukofsky's attacks on the epic sensibility. Poets can emphasize the significance of emotions intrinsic to complex acts of perception, rather than to the dramatic process of attributing meanings to perception by means of metaphors and symbols. "The accomplished fact," as Zukofsky put it, might carry "the maximum of the real." And, most important, by defining the maximum of the real in terms of perception in discrete yet intensive relations dependent upon compositional acts, the poets reinterpret the nobility of acts of mind. Nobility inheres not in transcending facts but in constructing their relations into immediately satisfying wholes. Because the real is "accomplished," not simply given in perception, acts of disclosure and formal composition demand all those energies which Romantic poets often felt could only be expressed either in apocalyptic vision or in dramatizing one's awareness of the dilemmas inherent in pursuing that vision. The real can be sufficient.

Collage construction enables images to become a form of thinking. Two closely related principles—field and measure—define the nature and value of that thinking. These concepts evade both description and symbolic interpretation by exhibiting meaning as itself dependent upon collage principles, upon the dynamics of relationship in a distinct field. In Oppen's terms, "things explain each other/not themselves." And "measure" is the term for describing the values created by discrete relations within a field. In Ignatow's poem, for example, the "meaning" is precisely the activity of the

image of the leaf as it is measured by the attributes it elicits from the responding poet. We can then consider the same principles at work in the ways objectivist poets handle the Romantic bogey of self-consciousness. So long as language remains essentially denotative and the energies of mind can be maintained within the compositional lines of force that the field establishes among the layered references in the poem, there need be no residue of unnameable desire or shaping will behind the poem, and no need for universals beyond it. There is nothing which can return in self-consciousness to haunt one with the fear that his fictions evade to transcend empirical conditions. As Denise Levertov illustrates in this volume, the mind's act brought to objective form is as present to itself as are the objects it brings into relationship. The writer can be as intensely personal as Oppenheimer and Dawson are below; still the personal energies are at once exhausted and maintained within the composition. The measure of the self, and the measure of the mind, is what stands in what one makes, not what one desires or intends or glimpses of universals only provisionally shadowed in particulars. Self and mind require no myth: their being is the intensity of their power to focus the "the" as it takes form through the hesitations of mind and melodic movements described in Levertov's essay. Objectivist poetics creates an instrument sufficiently subtle to make attention and care—to the world and to the corresponding energies the world elicits—ends in themselves. As the repeated references to the dance in this volume indicate, attention, care, and composition become testimony to levels of fit between the mind and the world in rhythmic interactions which require no supplementary justification in the form of abstract meaning.

III

The objectivist tradition has numerous sources, from Sappho to Flaubert to Zen. These formative influences and their transformations have been superbly documented by Herbert Shneidau and Hugh Kenner. But here, because our concern is with the continuing development of this tradition, attention must be focused on definition and on the exemplary presences which establish models for poetic practice and measures for other poets' imaginative achievements.

I define the objectivist tradition in American poetry as that body of work molded by freeing imagist techniques into methods of thought based on notions of field, measure, and "open form" in the service of principles of sincerity and objectification. Then, in order to keep from being hoist on my own definitions, I must be careful to

recognize the many different ways sincerity and objectification can be understood. Sincerity is usually not self-expression. Rather it involves insistence on the surface of the poem as concerned primarily with direct acts of naming as signs of the poet's immediate engagement in the areas of experience made present by conceiving the act of writing as a mode of attention. Sincerity involves refusing the temptations of closure—both closure as fixed form and closure as writing in the service of idea, doctrine, or abstract aesthetic ideal. Sincerity can take the form of presenting any form of direct experience—perceptions, feelings, a-logical or Olson's post-logical movements of thought—that is intensified in the act of writing. Objectification, then, pertains to various vehicles for bringing form and resolution to the energy fields elicited in pursuit of sincerity while concentrating on form as measure rather than controlling imposition. Objectification is a property of writing committed to composition rather than to interpretation. Techniques for objectification range from Levertov's and Zukofsky's sense of expressive melodic pattern to Jackson MacLow's experiments with formal and aleatory models of invention which make structure the creative ground rather than the result of immediate poetic thinking.

The best way to structure these varying stresses within objectivism is to recognize the field of possibilities created by the co-presence of three fully articulate stances—those of Williams, Zukofsky, and Olson. (Pound's long development stands as a kind of *summa* representing the interplay of all three modes.) In Williams the stress is on sincerity as a mode of attention that can be fully expressed only by insisting on the poet's dual role of antagonist-composer with respect to natural sciences. Poetry for Williams can be an intense form of disclosing the real because it is first of all an act of writing that remakes in order to recover perceptual energies. Attention becomes fully active only in re-constituting the forms of relatedness upon which it depends. Hence writing is the keenest instrument for disclosing modalities of voice, perspective, and structure as conditions of thinking in and with things. And conversely, writing aware of its exemplary status can be conceived less as a vehicle for imposing thoughts on the world than as a process of perception by composition. Zukofsky, on the other hand, emphasizes the freedom won in the act of writing: composition remains a mode of attention, but the activity of putting words together places the mind in a space where the forms constructed within perceptions are more significant than the immediate existential qualities disclosed by the poetic act. Adamantly opposed to *symboliste* displacements of objects into purely connotational relations, Zukofsky nonetheless tries to articulate objectivist ways of recovering the

import in Mallarmé's sense of the poem as artifact. Zukofsky's project is to insist on the transforming power of form while reinterpreting *symboliste* transcendence in terms of the self-sufficiency of poetic compositions or objects in their own right, capable of standing as emblems of the mind's place between natural and cultural energies.

Williams emphasizes the painterly qualities of poetic composition, Zukofsky the musical qualities. Olson's projectivist alternative does not so readily admit analogies from the other arts. The best I can do is to suggest as his ideal a synthesis of dance and prophetic philosophy—Nietzsche speaking from within the Dionysiac ritual. This stance, it goes without saying, threatens to destroy the objectivist poetics it desires to extend. But Olson comes to objectivism in a very different fashion from the poets who developed it in the thirties. Where they went from poetry to political commitments that they could not reconcile with their forms of literary attention, Olson shifted from a political to a poetic career. As a consequence, he demanded from the start a model of poetry that could handle what he envisioned as a revaluation of public values. He found in Fenollosa (buttressed by Whitehead) the principles for extending objectivism into a speculative ontology. The transformations here get quite complicated. Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character As a Medium for Poetry" is itself a transitional text between symbolist and objectivist modes. For Mallarmé, a sense of activity in nature, of "the forest's shuddering," warranted a radical opposition between a descriptive poetry intended to represent "the actual and palpable wood of trees" and a poetry stressing self-reflexive compositional acts that might capture the lines of relations between abstracted natural forces and the energies of a responding creative sensibility. The analogue to the forest's shuddering must be the delicate movement of energy between the poet's words, so that a poetry adequate to this analogical ground would have to conceive the self-contained book as its imaginative ideal. In order to render the subtlety of relations he saw, Mallarmé proposed to conjure up "the architecture of the ideal and only habitable place . . . else the book could not be properly closed." For Fenollosa, on the other hand, a similar vision of the mind's relation to the trees' motion demands discovering ways of denying closure so that the book might stay open to continual interchange. Fenollosa conceived the "visibility of metaphor" as the vehicle for keeping poetic language "always vibrant with fold on fold of overtones and with natural affinities." Metaphor could be objective and thus could ground Mallarmé's delicate sensations in physical fields of force. With this as his context, Olson could propose "objectism" as an explicit

metaphysical position combining the best of both worlds. Now a vision of sincerity was possible where the acts of perception and composition become measures of man's power to make himself a dynamic presence equal in intensity to the powers of nature: "When men are not such jugglers, are not able to manage a means of expression the equal of their own or nature's intricacy, the flesh does choke." But with sincerity now asked to carry such a large burden, Olson can overcome the impersonality that limits Zukofsky and early Williams only by finding himself hard-pressed to preserve objectivist constraints on the lyrical ego and unmeasured generalization. In theory, his position is exemplary: the true personal lies beneath the ego, because the "I" is only a limiting classification, reductive selection from energy fields where "any of us, at any instant, are juxtaposed to any experience . . . on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive which we inherit can declare." But ennobling man tempts Olson to risk once again mystifying the objects of attention proposed as the source of mystery. Olson's poetry vacillates between a somewhat private, anachronistic, and often pompous mythologizing of the self as the means for establishing projective size, and a complex interplay between the personal and the acts of a speculative mind discovering terms by which it is an extension of what it discloses. At his best Olson expands notions of objectivity, field, and measure so that they articulate a fully speculative mode of the objectivist sensibility. Some of the basic features of his enterprise reverberate in this volume. His sense of projective size as carried in the play of mind through syllables and breath units provide "proper instrumentation" for the witty allusiveness of Ed Dorn and for Paul McDonough's intense alliterative elaboration of the themes of rest and motion as terms of a speculative archaeology. And Olson's definitions of historical grounds for projective energies make possible the reenactments of mythic energies performed here by Paul Metcalf and John Taggart.

In my view Robert Duncan is the contemporary writer who most fully discloses the powers possible in the orientation Olson proposes. Duncan remains in spirit a Romantic poet, but the example of Olson and Pound enables him to relocate the energies of Romanticism within the dynamics of field poetics. The chapter from his *H.D.* book which Duncan has contributed to this volume may be the most interesting work of speculative imaginative play since the later writings of Yeats. Duncan, like Olson, flirts with the temptation of basing speculative poetry on the possibilities of a modern sublime. But precisely because Duncan's romanticism must be earned by intense struggles with Pound and Williams, his incursions into the sublime retain two distinct, "projective" objectivist features. First,

Duncan preserves the immediacies called for in the doctrine of sincerity. He defines sincerity, however, in terms of the divinations that constitute the imaginative field for self-reflexive acts, and thus that open "distances in back of" appearances. Duncan's text becomes a model of "how consciousness moves" at the interfaces between the positions of an empirical self and the groundings of that self in a larger Self which is source and ultimate shape of his loves and creative acts. Poetic desire is "arousal . . . to some larger form or soul-self . . . in which I have my present/presence or womb of myself." Second, this vision of the desires informing composition provides passage to a larger model of objectivity, definable as a tension between "the actual real and the real of imagination." On the one hand, this tension leads Duncan to a rich descriptive engagement with the oppositions that plague modern sensibilities as they struggle with models of the real that exclude and repress energies still present in imaginative traditions. On the other hand, Duncan tries to embody the interplay of relations contained in these traditions in order to show how the alternative to Pound's "clear edges" and Williams' "masculine voice" need not be the muddle of the Romantic sublime. The opposite of enlightenment clarity is not some vague infinity or apocalyptic darkness but an alternative objectivity constituted by the matrix of images recurring in the hermetic tradition and creating analogues between Duncan, H.D., and the archaeology informing their pursuits of a feminine dimension in imaginative language. Duncan's field is the net and net-work offered not by the world but by "the imagination of the world." The power of this field resides not in mystery or in abstraction, but in the measure of the "objective" relations his analogies disclose. Duncan's field permits remarkably sharp descriptions of the claims to truth in art and of the basic impulses and contradictions of modernism, while also producing suggestive contexts for clarifying the sources of what is described in traditional allegorical tensions between the claims of Paternal Law and of Maternal nature and nurture. Objectivism, for Duncan, need not be confined to objects because he understands, and exemplifies, how objectivity is ultimately not simply agreement about external conditions but about the possibility of locating what imaginative acts can share.

IV

I have been emphasizing doctrine rather than practice, partially because reading objectivist poetry requires denying oneself easy modes of engagement based on poetic and cultural residues of the

sublime. Abstractions have obvious limits, but they do provide access to the general desires of objectivist poets and they help contrast these poets to weaker, more flaccid writers who tend to get more recognition on the contemporary scene. If objectivist poetics forms a distinctive modernist tradition, one crucial role for that tradition is establishing principles of taste which enable one to criticize dominant contemporary poetic values without relying on vague ideals or academic versions of classical standards. We have precise examples of counter-practice on which much depends.

The contemporary poetry most honored by establishment journals and national prizes tends, with some intimidating exceptions, to manifest one of two basic styles. The first, as we have seen, is dominated by residues of the sublime, either in the personal intensities characteristic of the confessional tradition or in various explorations of the shift inward from perception to mythic levels of awareness, in the mode of deep image poetry or in Merwin's private sublime, where absence from self is the vehicle for mystery. The second mode is self-consciously anti-mythic, stressing attention to craft and tonal control of dramatic materials. But in rejecting the mythic, this mode rejects the various forms for exploring immediacy basic to modernist writing and is willing to return to a traditional sense of poetry as well-made, metaphoric meditation. Where the first mode tends to collapse the sublime into the ridiculous, the second runs the risk of displacing all traces of sincerity and the will to truth in its concern for artifice and for moral discriminations that often express a narcissism of moral sensitivity where composition collapses into merely formal composure.

These are large charges. In defense of them, let us look with objectivist eyes at a typical poem in this second mode, Mark Strand's "Elegy for My Father." I quote the opening and concluding lines of its first section:

The hands were yours, the arms were yours
But you were not there,
The eyes were yours, but they were closed and would not
open
The distance sun was there
The morn poised on the hills' white shoulder was there. . . .
But you were not there . . .
The baby was yours, but you were not there,
The air shivered against its skin
The dark leaned into its eyes,
But you were not there.

My first reaction is to ask, "Was ever father in such humor lamented?" The poem seems to place us in a concrete situation, but the situation is clearly only a lyric one. The details in the poem do not reflect any direct pressure of experience, nor do they explore actual terms of a typical emotion or attitude. They are radically abstracted from events and seem chosen primarily to sustain musical and imagistic patterns. Consequently the father appears as only the vehicle for standard lyric oppositions between presence and absence, oppositions which Strand does not explore but rather exploits. With the art of naming reduced to elaborating lyric oppositions, and with passion for the father displaced into what the poet can make of his death, the poem's energies betray a will to poetry dominating what Duncan projects as a will to use poetry as an instrument of discovery. Expressions like "the air shivered" and "the dark leaned" refer less to experience than to the creative writing workshop: making it new collapses into making verbs active and varying standard affective associations. And when mystery comes so close to mystification, one cannot help interpreting the lack of pressure on the composition as lack of real involvement or "sincerity." Composure is all too easy: compare the different elegaic voices of Dylan Thomas or Yeats or even Lowell's harsh particulars. Here Strand's distanced voice makes lyric control something close to indifference. And the aura of mature refusal of Romantic sublimities ironically relies on the easiest of all sublime themes, the theme of loss as a ground for incantation. Finally this quintessentially civilized voice makes one return to Duncan's critique of H.D.'s critics. The pressure of raw emotion has been so successfully distanced, without the contemplative poise of classic lyric voices like Jonson's, that one is tempted to see this poem as ultimately an example of a refined sensibility concealing and revealing moral bad taste. Passion for the father simply should not so easily become a passion for the symbolic and metaphoric effects the poet can wrest from his father's death.

I am uncomfortable relying on standards as shadowy as notions of genuineness and sincerity. But it is precisely the insistence on such standards and the exemplary practice of the objectivist tradition which give substance to equating artistic and moral criteria and to tracing the specific moral consequences of aesthetic choices. Some of the best writing here affords a sharp contrast to Strand. Attention to detail and to angle of vision in Rakosi's "Meditation" and in Dawson's complex memoir show how energetic writing begins in a profound care for surfaces, for conditions of being engaged by what one encounters beyond the lyric will. Then instead of lyric self-indulgence and purely affective elaboration, the play of details

builds a complex emotional arena. In Dawson's work, an essentially casual tone needs no rhetorical elegance to demonstrate the range of desires, affections, and resentments that accrue to memory and to the difficulty of balancing a moral stance with the rough edges of friendship and love. Love is not occasion for song, but for the articulation of direct, yet complex emotions.

Joel Oppenheimer's "Houses" makes the clearest contrast to Strand because Oppenheimer, like Creeley, engages themes of loss while risking the refusal to admit any turns toward eloquence or interpretation that might alter a concrete sense of the speaker's energies in an immediate act of composition. In this poem, in fact, hesitations that counter-balance the effort of naming serve rich mimetic functions because the focus of the poem is on the care to get things right, to clean up eighteen years of confusion and evasion that followed his divorce by showing the consequences of love and respect as they warrant direct speech. Oppenheimer's achievement is his use of this desire to name in such a way that it invites structural comparisons that intensify the details and bring them to a resolution. Directness in effect calls attention to compositional effects because each element has sufficiently strong identity to elicit our awareness of contrasts and to reward our reflection on unfolding interconnections. The simplicity of the poem's opening lines, for example, stresses a series of contrasts whose larger psychological pressures the poem must expand in order to resolve. The poem begins with a contrast between past and present that recalls Strand, but Oppenheimer immediately insists on extending these to other basic tensions. Definition of the "I" and the "you" with respect to the house, and to past and present, modulates into complex equations between the elder couple and the one to be married and between effects that endure in memory and intensities that create conflict yet prove ephemeral. The acts of placing and evaluating the relationship between the erotic and the effects of deeper character traits frame an implicit prothalamion for the young lovers, proleptically marking the difficulties they will encounter and the possible transformations of understanding which can derive from prolonged intimacy. Yet these themes exist only as extensions of direct experience within the poem. Thus they prepare for the concluding declaration, which calls attention to the writing as simultaneous vehicle of understanding and action. The reflections on memory and endurance resolve into the speaker's accepting his own house as emblem of reconciled loneliness, fixed in time and space. Then the final lines transform simple statement into testament and gift:

that is what
i did not know
and what
I now do know
and will remember.

As the lines return to the left margin, they climax the poem's efforts to name emotions exactly. They create a believable moment of self-definition which allows the self to project a determinate future. The future tense merges with an indicative promise as will and knowledge fuse. The writer establishes a psychological analogue for the new life his son embarks upon, and at the same time makes his coming to self-definition a final gift to his ex-wife, as testimony to the effects his appreciation of her relationship to him has created. The poem becomes a belated present for a different kind of union he now understands, and he makes himself and his ex-wife anew in the compositional space of writing. Writing becomes renewal, discovery, and the affirmation of commitments. Both past and future, both the time of understanding and the directions for future acts, become objectified in an act of memory that is also a release from the past. Objectification in poetry becomes, on many levels, the means for committing the self to relationships that master time and loss.

These intersecting energies—memory, definition of where one stands, vital speech, and renewal of the past in objectifications that offer themselves as commitments to the future—provide an apt context for a passage from Rakosi that seems to me a concise epigraph for the work gathered in this volume:

There is the raw data
A mystery translates it
into feeling and perception;
then imagination;
finally the hard
inevitable quartz
figure of will
and language.